

PATHOLOGIZING BLACK BODIES: THE LEGACY OF PLANTATION SLAVERY

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231

In 2007 Saidiya Hartman famously defined the afterlife of slavery as an existence determined by “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (2007: 6). Since then, the discipline of Black studies has actively embraced the productive intersection between the past and the present to point up the tragic perpetuation of racial oppression and the relentless struggle of the African American community in the United States. This continuity between the past and the present was evidenced in April 2020 when the entire world, immersed in the devastating Covid-19 pandemic, watched video footage of the murder of yet another African American man at the hands of the police. What was perhaps less apparent was the disproportionate toll that the pandemic itself had on the Black population of the country, a paradigmatic example of the invisible impact of structural racism. *Pathologizing Black Bodies: The Legacy of Plantation Slavery* (2023), co-authored by Constante González Groba, Ewa Barbara Luczak and Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis, explores the multiplicity of mechanisms through which these means of oppression are actualized in the present and represented in literature. The first in the series Routledge Studies in African American Literature, the monograph stems from the conception of the Black body as a site of inscription of historical violence, oppression and trauma, and scrutinizes this bodily “criminalization, sexualization and medicalization” (1). The book is divided in three sections centered around eugenics, trauma and food studies, which examine the corporeal imprint of slavery

as shown through the medical experimentation, capitalist commodification and exploitation as well as the fungibility of the racialized body. Alongside this, the detailed analysis provided in each of the parts assesses the different acts of resistance undertaken at an individual and communal level.

The first part, “Pathologizing ‘Blood’”, comprises two chapters in which Luczak tackles the application of scientific racism to the medical sciences and analyzes the tension between the structural implementation of these discourses and individual attitudes through two cases of study. The first chapter is concerned with the emergence of racial seroanthropology in the 1920s as a discipline that mobilized the symbolic power of blood for segregationist purposes. Through the contextualization and analysis of Wallace Thurman’s short story “Grist in the Mill” (1926), the author discusses the main cultural meanings of blood —namely, an essentialist substance, a symbol of danger, an emblem of community and a mark of purity (39)— and how these meanings are exposed and subverted in the narrative. This ideology was used to defend white superiority on biological grounds, and interracial contact was purported to endanger the well-being of the individual and the body politic. Labeled a “mock gothic fiction” (39) due to its treatment of conventional gothic tropes with an ironic and sarcastic tone, the short story taps into the long tradition of the genre in Southern literature. The narrative instantiates the process of appropriation and subversion of traditional associations between Blackness and monstrosity singled out by Maisha Wester in her seminal study of African American gothic forms (2012: 28). The second chapter continues to develop the ramifications of eugenics as a pseudo-scientific discourse, this time with the examination of involuntary sterilizations in Toni Morrison’s *Home* (2012). Through the fictionalization of characters and events, the novel invokes figures such as Dr. Marion J. Sims, heralded as the father of gynecology, and his infamous experiments on enslaved women; Eunice Rivers, the nurse who coordinated the Tuskegee syphilis experiments (1932–1972); and the 2010 scandal regarding the 7,600 sterilization procedures performed by the state of North Carolina between 1933 and 1973 that disproportionately targeted Black women. The novelty of this study resides in Luczak’s accurate analytical approach to Morrison’s novel through standpoint eugenics, a framework that employs the “epistemological perspective of eugenic victims” and vests it with a “greater weight in unearthing the medical profession’s abusive practices” (53). In addition to focusing on victims, Luczak examines the role of the bystander, highlighting how the intersection of race and gender becomes a fundamental axiom of what the author calls “female solidarity witnessing” (70).

In the second part, “Pathologizing the Body”, González Groba further develops the dimensions of corporeal pathologization by exploring the representation of the

racialized body as a disruptive element in need of containment, as well as the reversal of this tendency in antiracist discourses. The third chapter is concerned with the examination of literal forms of subjugation in two critically acclaimed contemporary novels, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) by Jesmyn Ward and *The Nickel Boys* (2019) by Colson Whitehead. The prison structures that govern Parchman Farm and the Arthur G. Dozier reformatory are testaments to the spatial legacies of plantation slavery, and the authors' mobilization of the tropes of the ghost and the double rely on the potential of gothic literature to articulate a profound social critique. Ward's specters signify on the intergenerational transmission of trauma and its iteration in the present. In turn, Whitehead's engagement with the doppelgänger reveals a division of the self predicated on the two main trends of the racial discourse: the possibility of transcendence is pitted against the pessimistic belief in the insuperability of antiblackness. Intimately related to the exercise of spatialized rememory vested with supernatural overtones that Rebecca Evans calls "gothic geomemory" (2021: 446), these spaces and beings underscore a transhistorical process of de-subjectification and erasure of the Black body. As counterpart to Luczak's analysis, in the fourth chapter González Groba expands on the discussion of the body politic as a metaphorical organism. The comparative analysis of Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream* (1949) and Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019) draws a parallel between both authors' employment of cancer as a metaphor for racism that effectively redresses the construction of Blackness as pathological. Each of them addresses their most immediate socio-historical context: while Smith sought to account for the malady of segregation in her native South, Kendi focuses on systemic racism at a national level, its origins and the mechanisms that enable its perpetuation today. Both authors converge in their categorical indictment of the politics of disposability (2023: 115) that devalue African American lives. Drawing on their personal battle with this disease and survival, Smith and Kendi advocate for the urgent enactment of radical measures that will avoid a metastatic expansion of racism and thus irrevocably imperil the "moral", "political" and "cultural health" of the nation (122).

The third part, "De-Pathologizing Access to Food and Land", discusses the afterlife of slavery within the sphere of food production and consumption and focuses on African American emancipatory strategies. The fifth chapter is concerned with food representation in hip-hop through artists such as Goodie Mob, Dead Prez, Notorious B.I.G. or OutKast, where it features both as a distinctive marker of Black identity as well as a testament to endemic racism. Niewiadomska-Flis examines current patterns of food distribution as bearing the imprint of plantation slavery dynamics in practices such as supermarket redlining that deprives minority areas of access to a broad variety of nutritional options. The author interrogates the interconnections among race, poverty, food accessibility and health through

the concept of food apartheid coined by Ashante Reese and “born at the intersection of residential segregation, economic capital (capitalist accumulation) and dispossession” (146). Niewiadomska-Flis delineates a health-conscious turn in hip-hop culture that seeks to raise awareness of dietary-derived health issues and to advocate for a healthier and greener revision of African American foodways. Faithful to its combative style, this process of “decolonizing their communities’ diets” becomes a powerful “act of rebellion against racial injustice and discrimination” (153). In the sixth chapter, the author explores the relationship between African Americans and land, one that has been historically marked by dispossession. Dispossession originated during slavery and was perpetuated through subsequent systems such as sharecropping, peonage or convict leasing. This opposition to Black land ownership as a chief mechanism of racial subjugation continued into the twentieth century with the blatant discriminatory practices enacted by the US Department of Agriculture. In this context, Niewiadomska-Flis proposes Natalie Baszile’s 2014 novel *Queen Sugar* as a counter-narrative of land reclamation and identity affirmation in a cultural space dominated by whiteness. Her analysis of the narrative’s sugarcane plantation through the lenses of Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia and Sarah Ahmed’s notion of affective economy underlines the problematization of the Southern rhetoric of the pastoral idyll through the African American protagonist who must confront the realities of agrarian structural racism. In turn, successfully accessing land will allow for a redefinition of a traditionally white co-opted space into a “site of [black] sovereignty and sustainability” (165) mediated by the community’s solidarity and a shift toward cooperative economics that also entails a redefinition of the self.

Pathologizing Black Bodies: The Legacy of Plantation Slavery offers an exhaustive account of the manifold manners in which African American existence has been pathologized and of the imprint that slavery has left on many spheres of Black life. These inquiries are informed by a multiplicity of theoretical concepts that emanate from different analytical frameworks, thus providing a comprehensive and detailed assessment of the multi-dimensional phenomenon of systemic racism in the United States. Luczak, González Groba and Niewiadomska-Flis examine a vast array of texts and genres ranging from the short story to hip-hop lyrics, extending from the early twentieth century to the present and with plotlines dating back to even earlier periods. These two facets of the monograph demonstrate the continuation of racial oppression and the pervasiveness of this issue within the contemporary social debate, thus speaking to its main quality: its timeliness. The book directly engages the inescapable hold of history and the presentness of the past, one that has been theorized by myriad Black intellectuals from a historical, social, cultural and philosophical perspective in recent years. From Michelle Alexander’s assessment of our era as “the New Jim Crow” (2010) to Christina Sharpe’s description of Black

life as perpetually embedded “in the wake” of slavery (2016), the discussion carried out in these pages dismantles the grounds for a falsely-proclaimed postracial age. Thus, with its acute critical analysis and exhaustive historico-theoretical survey, the monograph stands as an active call for racial justice and as a relevant asset in the expansion of Black studies.

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